

December 8, 2020
Senator Udall's Farewell Speech

As you know, I announced I wasn't running for re-election last year. If I'd known everyone was going to be so nice to me, I might have announced it earlier.

I'm not the only senator who's giving a farewell speech. Many of you got to hear Lamar Alexander speak last week.

Lamar is the perfect example of what a United States senator should be.

Before I was wet behind the ears in the Senate – my first week here – Lamar invited me and my wife, Jill, to dinner.

There it began. Jill and Lamar's wife, Honey, became fast friends. And Lamar and I grew closer, building the kind of friendship that is essential here in the Senate.

We worked together to get things done for our states – bolstering our national labs, and conserving our great outdoors.

Something else we shared was Mario – our barber in the Senate barber shop.

To be honest, that's the best place to learn the wisdom of the Senate. Sitting in Mario's chair.

Friendships like I have with Lamar – and with Mario – are what I will miss most about the Senate.

Because as any good senator will tell you, friendships are what get you over the finish line.

I will cherish the friendships I've forged over the last 12 years. And I will miss serving the people of New Mexico in Congress – the greatest honor of my life. I'm confident that New Mexico is in good hands – with my friend Senator Heinrich, my great partner over the last eight years. His dedicated advocacy for our communities and lands is an inspiration.

And with Senator-Elect Ben Ray Luján, who I have the privilege of calling a friend, and who I know will fight for New Mexico families every single day in the Senate.

I will miss the righteous struggle we take up in these halls – to build a more perfect union.

I will miss all of you – my staff, colleagues, and everyone who works around the clock – the unsung heroes who keep the Senate running.

There are too many to thank.

First and foremost, I thank my staff. Every Senator here knows we're only as good as the people on our team.

As my friend Pat Leahy says, we Senators are often just a constitutional impediment to the staff.

Over the years, I've been blessed with staffers who are full of talent, skill, drive, and heart.

I don't want to leave anyone out. I ask permission to enter into the record a list of all my staff who have been part of "Team Udall." I want to say thank you, from the bottom of my heart, to each of you for your hard work, public service, and commitment.

And thank you to my family – to my parents, Stewart and Lee Udall, who instilled in me the will to do good.

And to my brothers, sisters and cousins who have supported me throughout my three decades in elected office.

Thank you to our daughter Amanda – my forever campaign manager – and our son-in-law, Judge Jim, for their constant love and support.

And, most importantly, thank you to my brilliant and beautiful partner of 42 years, Jill Cooper Udall.

Jill has been my rock, my chief counsel, my-everything. I couldn't have asked for a better partner to have in this public service adventure.

And it's truly been an adventure – for this son of the West. But after 20 years, it's time for me to go back home.

As the great Western writer Wallace Stegner wrote:

"It is not an unusual life curve for Westerners - to live in and be shaped by the bigness, sparseness, space, clarity, and hopefulness of the West – to go away for study and enlargement and the perspective that distance and dissatisfaction can give – and then to return to what pleases the sight and enlists the loyalty and demands the commitment."

Stegner said that we fall into two categories: we're either "Boomers" or "Stickers." Boomers "pillage and run." Stickers are "motivated by affection, by such a love for place and its life that they want to preserve it and remain in it."

I'm a sticker.

And I'm also an optimist. To be more accurate: I'm a troubled optimist.

I've tried to open my eyes to the challenges we face – while never losing conviction in our ability to meet those challenges.

As the scientist Rachel Carson said: “One way to open your eyes is to ask yourself, ‘What if I had never seen this before? What if I knew I would never see it again?’”

I believe this nation has arrived at a moment when we are opening our eyes. To the enormous challenges before us – and also to their solutions.

Our planet is in crisis – facing mass extinction and climate change. Our people are in crisis – ravaged by a pandemic that has laid bare the inequities of our society. And our democracy is in crisis – as the people’s faith in their government is shaken.

We cannot solve one of these crises without solving the others.

That’s why I’m troubled.

But all I have to do to be optimistic is to look around me.

I look at the young people across this country – who are calling for change. For climate action, for voting rights and immigrant rights, for economic and environmental and racial justice.

They’ve held sit-ins in my office. Probably in yours too. They are demanding that we do better. And their determination gives me hope.

And I am optimistic, as I look back on the small acts of kindness – and the big acts of progress – that define my time in Congress.

I believe that there are lessons in these accomplishments.

Now, you may know me as someone who wants to reform the filibuster, but to be clear: I’ve always supported the talking filibuster. So, if you’ll indulge me – and by the rules of the Senate, you have to – I’d like to talk about a few of the highlights of my career, and what I learned from them.

As you know, protecting America’s outdoor treasures is a cause close to my heart. It’s something of a family project.

My family homesteaded in the West almost 180 years ago. And like generations of Udalls before me, I grew up with a special connection to the land. To the gorgeous, untamed beauty of the West. Sixty-mile vistas. Snow covered, rugged mountains. Alpine lakes and abundant wildlife.

Mitt Romney knows this – our great grandfathers settled the same small Western community.

Stegner called the West “the geography of hope.” It sure is for me. It’s what has inspired much of my public service.

And that’s why I’m so proud of what we’ve accomplished together to conserve our natural heritage.

On the Appropriations Committee, we've worked together for resources for our public lands and environmental protection – on a bipartisan basis, in the face of massive proposed cuts. And we've held off anti-environmental riders that have no place in these bills.

Thank you to my friend, Lisa Murkowski, who has been the best partner I could ask for in this work.

In New Mexico, where public lands are central to our way of life, we've had enormous success: unlocking tens of thousands of acres of enchanted land for all to enjoy.

Each of these efforts was collaborative – and community driven.

And that collaborative work culminated in one of the biggest conservation victories in American history – the passage of the Great American Outdoors Act.

Thanks to the determination of a grassroots coalition, and many champions here in Congress, we got this bill over the finish line.

For the first time, we've realized the promise of the Land and Water Conservation Fund – the promise my father envisioned over 55 years ago, when he helped create our nation's most successful conservation program.

After more than 20 years of fighting for this in Congress, I'm thrilled we got it done – together.

The law is a model for how conservation and economic recovery can go hand in hand.

It will help us achieve the urgent goal of protecting 30 percent of our lands and waters by 2030.

Enacting the Great American Outdoors Act – at a time of immense division – is a tremendous feat. It tells us a lot about what we're capable of.

It tells us that conservation is popular – a political winner. Environmental protection can be an area of cooperative action. It must be, if humanity is to survive and prosper.

As I talk about my love of the land, I cannot neglect to acknowledge how much I have learned from the original stewards of this land – Native Americans.

I got my start in politics working with my father, fighting alongside the Navajo uranium miners who had been hurt by this nation's nuclear weapons program.

My work as Vice Chair of the Indian Affairs Committee has been the honor of a lifetime. And another area where we've achieved bipartisan progress.

I thank our chairman, Senator Hoeven, and Senator Barrasso before him, for their partnership and friendship.

We've worked together as a committee for better health care, education, housing, and urgently-needed resources for Native communities – especially as they battle this pandemic.

The federal government's obligation to uphold its trust and treaty obligations is sacred. Some of my proudest achievements have been the result of working with Tribal leaders to advance Indian Country's priorities and to support New Mexico's 23 Tribes.

Recently, a bipartisan coalition passed legislation to strengthen the principle of Tribal self-governance, provide Native entrepreneurs critical resources, and secure investments in Native-language revitalization.

The achievements I remember most fondly are ones like these – those we did together. Indeed, those are the only kinds of achievements that are possible in this body.

Take the *Frank R. Lautenberg Chemical Safety for the 21st Century Act* – our landmark reform of the *Toxic Substances Control Act*.

It was the biggest environmental reform in a generation. I was proud to lead that effort to protect our families from toxic chemicals. It was hard work. It took years.

But if you can get a project where Jim Inhofe and Ed Markey are working for the same goal, you can get a lot done around here.

It's another example of how friendships get you over the finish line.

My friendship with David Vitter – my partner on TSCA – was sort of like Ted Kennedy and Orrin Hatch's friendship.

A political odd-couple. Me, the son of Mormon pioneers. David, a son of New Orleans. Two very different political backgrounds – and different views on the big problems before us.

But I'll never forget the dinner we had, after Frank Lautenberg passed, when we decided to take on TSCA reform.

We looked at each other and said: "We're going to get this done."

And we did. It passed unanimously. We agreed there was a problem, and we found common ground on a solution. That's still possible in the Senate.

But I didn't come here to just list accomplishments. You can check my Twitter feed if you want to see more of that.

I do want to share some final thoughts about the challenges our nation faces before I leave the Senate.

I believe that for all of us here, public service is a calling.

It certainly is for me.

In my life, I've had the privilege of learning from many dedicated public servants.

One of them was Senator John McCain.

Senator McCain was a friend to me, and a friend to my family.

When John first came into the House, my uncle, Mo, took him under his wing.

John did the same for me. And we worked together, on issues like campaign finance reform.

John often said to me: "We disagree in politics – but not in life."

Let's remember that: "We disagree in politics – but not in life."

My great grandfather helped settle St. John's, a small farming and cattle community on the Arizona-New Mexico border, in the 1880's. He had an embroidery that hung in his frontier home that read: "If the good folks don't get into politics, the scoundrels will take over."

I believe there are a lot of "good folks" here in the Senate.

But the system we're caught in makes it too hard to work together. To remember that we disagree in politics, but not in life.

I'm not the first to say this in a farewell address, and I won't be the last, but the Senate is broken. It's not working for the American people.

We are becoming better and better warriors. We're good at landing a punch – at exposing hypocrisy, and riling each other up – but we aren't fostering our better angels.

Our peacemaking skills are atrophying.

But every hurt takes time to heal. And each time we hurt each other, it sets us back.

But unfortunately, the structures we have built reward us for hurting one another.

We need to reform those structures, or we'll never make the progress we need to make.

I've proposed rules changes in both the minority and the majority. To make sure this institution does not remain a graveyard for progress.

The founders did not envision a Senate requiring 60 votes to act.

The filibuster came to be through historical accident, and is now woven into the institutional framework.

The promise of the filibuster is that the majority will find common ground with the minority.

But the reality of the filibuster is paralysis.

On top of this, we have a campaign finance system that is out of control. John McCain would have told you that.

Secret money floods campaigns to buy influence, instead of letting the voters speak. Voting rights are under attack.

We can do our best to be good people in a system like that, but it's no surprise that America's faith in government is declining.

These structures are anti-democratic. They reward extremism. They punish compromise.

Our government is supposed to respond to the will of the majority while protecting the rights of the minority.

Instead, we have "the tyranny of the minority." That minority is super-wealthy, politically powerful, and dangerously out-of-touch with the American people.

The majority of Americans support:

- Pandemic relief,
- Health care for every American,
- Climate action,
- Racial justice and police reform,

And so many other priorities that don't see much progress in the Senate.

People are losing faith in the system – rightfully so. We have to do something to fix this.

If we are to take the bold action necessary to tackle the urgent problems before us, we must reform our democracy. We must make it easier to vote.

We must end the dominance of big money. We must root out corruption.

And we do not have any time to waste. We have no choice but to be bold.

Because the crises before us demand bravery.

Hundreds of thousands of Americans are dead from a pandemic – a pandemic that this administration has callously ignored, a consequence of its continued rejection of science. In New Mexico, we've surpassed 108,000 cases, over 1,700 are dead, and tens of thousands have lost their jobs.

Meanwhile, our nation is facing dual climate and nature crises of epic proportions. Earlier this year, much of the American West was engulfed in wildfire. As an arid state, New Mexico is in the crosshairs of climate change.

We lose a football field's worth of nature every thirty seconds. A million species are at risk of extinction because of human activity.

Our planet's life support system is under threat. As the climate crisis worsens, ecosystems are destroyed. And as ecosystems are destroyed, we emit more harmful greenhouse gases. We cannot solve one crisis without solving the other.

Protecting nature is about protecting humanity. It's that simple.

And marginalized communities—communities of color, low-income communities and Indigenous people—are bearing the worst consequences of the environmental destruction and pollution caused by the rich and powerful.

We have the power to solve these crises. The power, and the obligation.

All it takes are clear eyes – and political will. And remembering that we may disagree in politics – but not in the future that we want for our children.

When I was a young man, I spent the summer of 1969 in the mountains of Colorado – teaching students wilderness skills. Each night, we'd look up and open our eyes to the moon. It seemed impossibly far away.

I'm reminded of Rachel Carson's words: "One way to open your eyes is to ask, what if I had never seen this before?"

When we emerged from the wilderness, we learned what Apollo 11 achieved. We had landed on the moon – the moon that seemed so impossibly far away.

We should never forget that we can do the impossible when we open our eyes to the challenge – and work together to meet it.

So as I return home to the West, I am clear eyed about – even troubled by – how far away our destination is. But I am optimistic that we will get there. Like we always have before.

For the last time, I yield the floor.